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## CIVIL-MILITARY RELATIONS AND GEN MAXWELL TAYLOR: GETTING IT RIGHT AND GETTING IT WRONG!

BY

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#### USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

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**ABSTRACT** 

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Professor Richard Kohn argues that powerful military officers pose a threat to the U.S. because their voice is too strong in the decisions the government makes. This paper contests this view. It looks at two situations involving a very powerful general officer, Maxwell Taylor, to show that strong military men pose no danger to the well-being of the United States when they do the job for which they are paid. In the first situation, Taylor got his civil-military relations right, even though he fought a losing battle with President Eisenhower over Ike's dangerous defense strategy of "massive retaliation." He was forced to retire over the fight, but the nation's best interests were protected. In the second situation, Taylor got it wrong: He was recalled to active duty by JFK and became so close to the Kennedys that he could not tell the President "no," even when the nation's defense stakes were high. "Vietnam" as we have come to know and hate it may be the result.

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## Introduction

In his thought-provoking article, "Out of Control: *The Crisis in Civil-Military* Relations," Professor Richard Kohn claims that an corrosion of civilian control over the military has occurred and that, if left unchecked, it could pose a serious threat to American government (and society) as we know it. Kohn is particularly fearful of very powerful military men. He believes their relative influence in governmental decision-making has become so great that it endangers the national well-being. Kohn admits that civil-military relations are situational and that chances of a coup d'etat are virtually nil. And, he states that civilians "decide the extent to which the professional military is to be consulted and heard and where to divide responsibility and authority between civilian and military" business.<sup>2</sup>

Yet, Kohn believes the demarcation line defining civilian control and proper civil-military relationships "has never been, and cannot be, determined with clarity and finality." This fact, coupled with ignorance on the part of the American military about civilian control and proper civil-military relations, 4 means abuse of civil authority might occur and the results could be disastrous. He demonstrates his point by showing how this situation has already led to a bonafide crisis -- Kohn called it a "mutiny in the ranks" -- in which General Colin Powell led the military in taking "full advantage of a young,

incoming president with extraordinarily weak authority in military affairs" and "rolled" him over the issue of gays in the military.<sup>6</sup>

This paper will provide a second opinion on Doctor Kohn's dire prognosis of the health of civil-military relations in this country. Specifically, it will contest any notion that powerful military leaders pose a threat to civilian rule in the United States. It will examine two situations involving a powerful officer, General Maxwell Taylor, and two Presidents he directly served as advisor. In the first situation, a highly confrontational one between Taylor and President Eisenhower, Taylor got his civil-military relations right. He vehemently bucked Ike over the President's dangerous defense strategy of "massive retaliation" and, in so doing, protected the best interests of the nation.

In the second situation, General Taylor got his civil-military relationship with the President all wrong. His very amicable relations with President John Kennedy, during JFK's early, crucial decision-making on U.S. intervention in Vietnam, allowed our nation to stumble into a catastrophe in Southeast Asia. The combination of these two situations will demonstrate that America's senior military leaders must always remember their proper place, subordinate to civil authority, but must never forget that, even in their subordination, they have an obligation to stand firm on important national issues, even when it might entail clashing with the President. No less than the nation's well-being could be hanging in the balance.

## Taylor and Eisenhower: Getting Civil-Military Relations Right!

If very strong military men really pose a threat to U.S. governance, as Professor Kohn suggests, then General Maxwell Taylor's career might serve as a good case in point. For, when he served as President Eisenhower's Army Chief of Staff and as Special Military Representative (MILREP) and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS) to President Kennedy, Taylor was widely viewed as the nation's most popular, powerful, and political military man and, by some, as one of this country's all-time great military leaders. David Halberstam called him "the leading military officer of an era," compared him favorably with President Eisenhower and said he dominated his era much in the way that Marshall had dominated his. By the time Taylor became Eisenhower's Army Chief of Staff, he had already gained enormous fame serving under Ike as combat commander of the 101st Airborne Division in Normandy; had built on that fame as commander of the 8th Army, fighting communist aggression in Korea; and, was conceded as the odds-on pick for Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Still, as Taylor assumed his duties as Army Chief in 1955, he was aware that his fame and friendship with Ike would be of little use to him in his dealings with the President on the national defense strategy of "massive retaliation." According to David Halberstam in The Fifties, President Eisenhower's views on national defense were different from what one might expect of a retired General of the Army. By the fall of 1953, his administration had begun formulating what it called the "New Look" which

clearly "reflected the President's belief that the true strength of America came from a healthy economy and that a heavy defense budget would diminish that strength." Ike's views were perhaps best stated by his Treasury Secretary, George Humphrey, who said, "There would be no defense, [but only] disaster in a military program that scorned the resources and the problems of our economy -- erecting majestic defenses and battlements for the protection of a country that was bankrupt." Eisenhower felt an overwhelming need to give the country a tax break to shore up an economy weakened by the past decade's two major wars, and he proposed to do so by making big cuts in defense spending. 10

Eisenhower was supported in these aims by Admiral Arthur Radford, his handpicked successor to Omar Bradley as CJCS. Radford was a forward-thinking military
man who believed that modern technology and strong air power, supplemented with
nuclear weaponry, could provide "limitless" military capability<sup>11</sup> on the cheap, albeit at
the expense of Army ground forces. His position on meeting defense needs with a
reduced budget was just what Ike wanted: Radford felt the cuts would be "possible if the
JCS could narrow its options, plan for fewer contingencies, and assume that in almost any
conflict nuclear weapons would quickly be used."<sup>12</sup> Eisenhower was willing to accept the
risks inherent in such preemptory use of nuclear weaponry in order to gain the budget
cuts he sought. So, he quickly "bought off" on Radford's plan -- and the result became
known as the military strategy of "massive retaliation."<sup>13</sup>

"Massive retaliation" was a highly debatable defense strategy. It dictated that the United States "would react instantaneously, to even the smallest provocation, with nuclear weapons." It was thought that the mere knowledge of this strategy would deter any enemy from daring to provoke us. And, even if they did, "massive retaliation" guaranteed that the U.S. would win quickly; thus, "all future wars would be short and inexpensive."

This strategy was not only highly debatable but it was highly debated. Radford supported the policies, but other uniformed leaders, including Taylor's old friend, mentor and former combat commander, Matthew Ridgway, bitterly and defiantly opposed them. So, General Taylor could not have been too surprised when both Secretary of Defense Charles Wilson and Eisenhower personally interviewed him -- measured his willingness to play politics by specifically asking him if he would obey their orders even when he didn't agree with them -- before Ike would nominate Taylor to replace Ridgway as Army Chief of Staff. 16

Yet, promises or no, General Taylor simply could not force himself to support so risky a venture as placing all the nation's defense eggs in the "massive retaliation" basket. In <u>The Certain Trumpet</u>, General Douglas Kinnard wrote that, even though he made those promises, Taylor was not long into his first tour as Army Chief of Staff before he "ran head-long into strategic issues that...brought him into conflict with the president." Over the course of Taylor's four-year tenure, the conflict became red hot as Eisenhower

steadfastly stuck to his strategy as a way of getting "better bang for the buck" -- and as he required his uniformed advisors to publicly "salute the flag" and support his policies.

General Taylor wouldn't succumb. He resolutely refused to support Presidential policies he thought were wrong-headed and dangerous. From his personal experience as an Army general with an extensive background in leading ground troops in combat and in witnessing, first-hand, undelivered promises of airpower prowess in support of ground attacks, <sup>18</sup> Taylor knew that airpower was a less effective weapon than many officers were willing to admit. And, he doubted that nuclear weapons would or could play as important a role in the defense of the nation as the President and his supporters wanted to think. He and most military planners came to believe "that nuclear weapons had produced a state of mutual deterrence...[and that] future conflicts were likely to be of a limited nature, with an emphasis on ground-force capability."<sup>19</sup> Thus, Taylor viewed "massive retaliation" as being outright dangerous and that "unless something changed...the country might end up blundering into a nuclear war, just because we were not capable of fighting any other kind."<sup>20</sup>

So, he stood his ground even though he was often accused by civilians in the Eisenhower administration of not being a team player. And in this situation, he wasn't. "Massive retaliation" was too dangerous and the national defense stakes were too high. His strong sense of duty allowed him no choice but to stand tall and defy, sometimes bitterly, his old combat commander throughout his two terms as Army Chief of Staff.

Finally, on March 9, 1959, all the fighting came to a head. General Taylor did the unthinkable: He testified, "most vehemently" of all the service chiefs, against the President's defense policies before Senator Lyndon Johnson's Defense Preparedness Subcommittee. In Taylor's own words, his "open testimony...had a country-wide impact...it revealed for the first time the extent of the schism within the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the division in their views on Massive Retaliation and related matters of strategy."

It also politically embarrassed the President and greatly irked him. In response, Ike instructed General Nathan Twining to "caution the Joint Chiefs that the military in this country is a tool and not a policy-making body; the Joint Chiefs are not responsible for the high-level political decisions." Kohn, who said the military "must abandon participation in public debate about foreign and military policy, and stop building alliances...in Congress," would no doubt relate well with how Eisenhower must have felt at this moment. At the end of his meeting with Twining, Ike dejectedly philosophized "on the difficulties of a democracy running a military establishment in peacetime."

General Taylor understood those difficulties all too well. At this point, he was overcome by "an overwhelming feeling of frustration, even a sense of defeat." On the very day that he testified before Congress against Eisenhower's defense strategy, he

announced his retirement from the Army. Though it was the Army's turn to provide the next Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and though he was without peer in all the uniformed services, General Taylor knew that his fights with his Commander in Chief over national military strategy had cost him any chance of being promoted to the highest military position in the land.

Taylor was right in this thinking. Eisenhower could not afford to have as his senior military advisor an officer with whom he fundamentally disagreed on basic defense issues. Nonetheless, Ike sent an emissary, General Andrew Goodpaster, to try to talk Taylor out of retiring by offering him the very prestigious position of Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) in lieu of the CJCS job. Taylor was tempted by the offer, but he graciously turned it down. He told Goodpaster that he thought the administration's defense policies were dangerous and he "had decided that, for the good of the country, he had to leave the service and as an unfettered civilian take his case to the American public."<sup>27</sup>

General Taylor's strong moral stance on this issue -- his refusal to have his silence purchased with the promise of a prestigious assignment -- led Colonel Harry Maihafer to include this decision in his book of fifteen courageous decisions that demonstrate how America's military leaders should put country and honor above self in such morally ambivalent situations. Maihafer lauds Taylor's selfless decision to turn down a plum assignment so he could be free to tell the "unfettered" truth about the grave dangers

facing the country. In so doing, Taylor was choosing the "harder right instead of the easier wrong," the moral imperative for which he was taught to pray at West Point.<sup>28</sup>

Professor Kohn would no doubt disagree with Colonel Maihafer's appraisal of the greatness of General Taylor's brave decision for two reasons. First, Kohn disagrees that even *retired* military officers have a right to publicly state their "unfettered" views. He writes that they are part of a "distinct military community in the United States" that poses a "threat to civilian control" because it may possess a "sense of identity, interests, and perspectives separate from the rest of society, feel "abused and alienated," and be "willing to speak out or even lash out ...as a separate military interest." 29

And, Kohn would likely find nothing morally courageous in such a perfect example of what is wrong with the system of civilian control over the military. He wrote:

What is rarely grasped, even by those who are involved, is that both structurally and operationally, the [civil-military] system does not work smoothly much of the time. The military does obey orders and civilians do make the major decisions, but beneath the surface the process consists of continual conflict and struggle for influence, which on occasion blows up and flares into major confrontation.... Sometimes, even when there appears to be harmony, there is on-going negotiation, compromise, conflict, and maneuvering, the reality of which makes "civilian control" a far more complicated and less certain business. <sup>30</sup>

Professor Kohn is wrong on both these points. The very existence of a retired General of the Army serving as President and taking a strong anti-military stance on defense issues argues against Kohn's first concern. In fact, Ike's position on national

defense serves as a powerful testament to the dangers that inhere in anyone's generalizing too broadly about how powerful military men, active or retired, might respond to the needs of the nation.

As for Kohn's second point, Chief of Staff Taylor's fights with Eisenhower over national defense strategy does appear to fit his description of dysfunctional civil-military relations in America. Yet, Ike would see the whole business as far less complicated and much more certain than Kohn suggests. Even though the President harbored reservations about the problems inherent in a democracy's leading a peacetime military establishment, he would likely disagree outright with any contention that his administration's subterranean, bureaucratic in-fighting posed a threat to the nation. For, while Eisenhower expected an ultimate consensus and demanded a public show of solidarity with his policies, he nonetheless encouraged the type of subterranean clashes among his civilian and military advisors that Kohn considers dangerous.

According to John Burke and Fred Greenstein, one "of the most conspicuous qualities of the Eisenhower administration's meetings was the spirited, no-holds-barred debate that marked them. The participants did not appear to hold back out of deference to the president or to tailor their advice to him." And Ike approved. In his memoirs, he attested to the value he placed on such open airing of disagreement. "Such things as unanimity in a meeting of men of strong convictions working on complex problems is often an impossibility. I never asked or expected them to [reach unanimity]." He later

said that his method of making important decisions was to get "courageous men, men of strong views" before him and "let them debate and argue with each other." 33

Debate and argue is just what General Taylor did -- until he couldn't take it any longer. Then he went before Congress and told Senator Johnson's subcommittee just what he really thought about the dangers inherent in President Eisenhower's national defense strategy that relied so heavily upon nuclear weapons. In the heat of the moment, Ike condemned the political nature of Taylor's (and the other Chiefs') testifying before Congress. But, in military circles, where the nature of proper military behavior really is understood, there would likely be much room for debate about the appropriateness of Taylor's Congressional testimony against his Commander in Chief. Loyalty is a supreme virtue of soldiership and a healthy respect for loyalty is deeply rooted in the customs and traditions of our military services. When Taylor went before the Congressional subcommittee to testify against Eisenhower's policies, he was clearly guilty of being disloyal to his President.

Yet, one might correctly argue that in this act of disloyalty, Taylor was, in effect, placing a greater premium upon even higher military values that, from his earliest days as a West Point Cadet, had been deeply ingrained and come to serve as his overriding moral compass: Duty, Honor, Country. For, Taylor's first loyalty was not to his president but to his country, and he felt absolutely duty-bound to stand up and fight for his nation's well-being. His sense of honor would not have allowed him to act any other way. Thus,

he correctly testified before Congress -- he owed it to his nation. And, he just as correctly chose to retire in the aftermath. He owed that to his Commander in Chief.

Examining this situation with nearly forty years' hindsight as a guide, one must conclude that no enduring harm arose from this bitter exchange between this strong military man and the President he served. From a national perspective, any lessons drawn would have to be positive. President Eisenhower's reliance on "massive retaliation" bought him maneuver room to improve a stagnating economy. The public debate over his defense strategy ultimately resulted in its being replaced with a more suitable reliance upon conventional forces to counter the actual threats facing the country. The national tradition of civilian dominance over the military was strengthened when General Taylor chose to stand before Congress and have his say -- and then to resign in deference to the man who was really in charge. In so doing, Taylor placed the debate in the public realm where it belonged, and then he voluntarily relinquished his official rights as a debater. The only casualty in this confrontation between a powerful soldier and his civilian superiors was the soldier; and, in such matters, the military tradition of selfless service wouldn't have it any other way. The nation's best interests were served.

In contrast, the best interests of the nation are less likely to be served when powerful military men summarily mute their strongly held convictions on important national matters out of sheer deference to civil authority. In <u>The Commanders</u>, former Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger voiced this concern when he warned a successor, Defense

Secretary Dick Cheney, that "the problem with the military was not that the senior officers were uncontrollable, but the opposite. After a lifetime of taking orders, generals and admirals were, if anything, too compliant." Schlesinger's concerns run precisely counter to those of Kohn and are worthy of further examination. We shall do so by reviewing a second situation involving General Maxwell Taylor and the highly regrettable civil-military relationship he enjoyed with President John Kennedy during two early, crucial decisions on U.S. intervention in Vietnam.

## Taylor and Kennedy: Getting Civil-Military Relations Wrong!

After retiring as Army Chief of Staff, Taylor's first "unfettered" civilian action was to publish The Uncertain Trumpet, a "trenchant critique" of his former President's national defense strategy. In a move that would surely dismay Kohn, this retired general timed the book's publication to coincide with the January 1960 opening of Congress, hoping that it would spur a great debate on national security during Ike's final year in the White House. As General Kinnard said, "It did that and more, turning out to be the basis for the defense program set forth by John Fitzgerald Kennedy (JFK) in his successful 1960 campaign against Richard Nixon." It also led to Kennedy's recalling Taylor to active duty and appointing him to serve as Special Military Representative (MILREP) to the President. This position was created especially for Taylor by JFK to fill a civil-military void that resulted from Kennedy's strained relations with the Pentagon over the Cuban Bay of Pigs fiasco. 37

Special Military Representative was an appropriate title for General Taylor in his return to active duty as a 4-star general in the JFK White House, because his relationship with the Kennedy clan was nothing if not special. In retrospect, it seems to have transcended the professional bounds of propriety that normally exist in civil-military relations between Presidents and their military advisors. General Earl Wheeler said that "Taylor had an influence with President Kennedy that went far beyond military matters..." Kennedy saw Taylor as "dispassionate and rational, indeed more like himself than anyone else in the new Administration...." Even the MILREP's office, located in the White House near the President's Oval Office, suggested this was no ordinary civil-military relationship. Taylor had quick entree to JFK and he knew he "always had the President's confidence."

Other JFK people viewed the handsome and charming Taylor as almost the perfect character right out of Camelot. Bobby Kennedy "worshipped" Taylor, considered him a "Renaissance man" and constantly promoted him with the President. He even named his son, Maxwell, after the general. And many Kennedy advisors stood in awe of Taylor. They viewed him as a "cultured war hero"-- a good general, different from the old-fashioned Eisenhower men. They believed Taylor would be a Kennedy general, at least as loyal to them as to his uniform and institution.

Taylor willingly became a Kennedy general in precisely the sense the Kennedy people hoped. He quickly became more politicized than any top military advisor to date. The Joint Chiefs of Staff distrusted Taylor and considered him a White House man. 45

This transition was easy for him -- Taylor thought the Kennedys to be just as special as they considered him. He became especially close friends with Robert Kennedy and they retained tight social bonds until Bobby was assassinated. 46 At RFK's death, Taylor was overcome with shock and grief and wrote, "I shall always be indebted to him for changing the course of events in a way which allowed me to play a small part in the historical drama of John F. Kennedy, to know Ethel, Jackie, and the others of his extraordinary family and to have my life enriched by the friendship of Bobby Kennedy." In his autobiography, he totally avoided discussing personalities, pro or con, except for "testifying to the author's admiration and affection for the Kennedy family."

These feelings of admiration and affection were clearly mutual and pretty "heady stuff" for the general after four frustrating years in the Eisenhower administration.<sup>49</sup> In American history, no more amicable civil-military relationship has likely existed since President George Washington served as his own Commanding General while squelching the Whiskey Rebellion in 1794. But while this situation made for a harmonious civil-military relationship -- one likely in close consonance with how Professor Kohn might envision a civil-military utopia<sup>50</sup> -- it was, in reality, exceedingly dangerous for the country. For in such an environment, an advisor, even a very powerful military one,

found it difficult to stand up and question his President or the best and brightest knights that served him.<sup>51</sup>

As MILREP and CJCS, General Taylor found it impossible to question too vociferously anything President Kennedy wanted to do. Of his battles against Ike, Taylor later wrote, "While I never particularly minded the conflict with my Pentagon peers, I felt keenly the increasing coolness of my relations with the President."52 In his second coming as a four-star general serving directly as a Presidential advisor, it seems as if Taylor resolved that he would never again suffer such uncomfortable Presidential coolness. The record is replete with instances in which he sought to avoid it. According to General Kinnard, he "moved cautiously, offering advice only when asked...and...was very careful 'not to get his hands dirty [or] to leave any bureaucratic trail' of his actions."53 He chose to "go along" on issues with which he did not agree, because, to do otherwise, would be "bucking city hall." No one could justifiably accuse him of not being a team player<sup>55</sup> -- staff members noticed that he would never recommend anything "that he knew McNamara would not approve." And, especially important, during this period, he developed a terrible, dangerous "bureaucratic proclivity -- a failure to stand up and be counted when in the minority."57

These qualities in the President's principal military advisor had tragic consequences for the nation as the Kennedy administration thumped the "war drums" ever more loudly in favor of U.S. military intervention in South Vietnam. Taylor, the only military leader

in whom JFK retained any confidence,<sup>58</sup> had to know that intervention was a mistake. He was a charter member of the "Never Again Club," a group of embittered Korean War veterans who "vowed that never again would they fight a land war on the Asian mainland without nuclear weapons." As a protégé and linear descendent of Army Chief of Staff Matthew Ridgway, Taylor was well aware of Ridgway's 1954 in-depth study that showed clearly the dangers of getting sucked into a land war in the steamy jungles of Vietnam and spurred Eisenhower to decide against intervention. And, as CJCS in 1963, he participated in a "war game," SIGMA I, that demonstrated scary and depressing news:

At least a half-million U.S. combat troops would be required to achieve victory in a ground war in Vietnam.

Even so, Taylor would not stand up against the known intervention wishes of his President. Rather than attempting to block JFK's dangerous policies as he had during his Ike years, he became complicit in the blunders and miscalculations: Halberstam called him "the key military figure in all the estimates" that went so badly awry. He became a major part of the problem when, as the most prestigious knight of Camelot and virtually its only *heard* voice in military affairs, he should have led the charge against intervention. However, during Taylor's MILREP and CJCS years, he failed to do so, and his failures allowed JFK to make two major policy blunders on Vietnam intervention.

The first occurred shortly after Taylor returned to active duty as JFK's MILREP. In it, Kennedy "loaded the dice" in favor of intervention by assigning Taylor and Walt

Rostow, a known war hawk, <sup>63</sup> to lead a team to South Vietnam to assess a request from President Ngo Diem for increased U.S. military aid. According to General Kinnard, in his final report on the visit, General Taylor, over the objections of several lesser known members of the traveling party, stretched the truth to give his President what he wanted: <sup>64</sup> A recommendation "for an enormous increase in advisers and support personnel that...Kennedy approved. It is what JFK was anticipating when he dispatched his military representative, and it is what he got." <sup>65</sup>

This was a small and seemingly innocuous first step, but it has come to be viewed as a benchmark 66 in the history of the Vietnam War. It set the tone of future debates on escalation and, basically, guaranteed those escalations would occur. 67 From this point on, there would be no turning back. And Taylor knew better. His recommendations to increase American involvement -- to risk slinking into a land-war in Asia -- contradicted everything he knew about Vietnam and the public positions he, as an original "Never Again" man, had previously taken. Yet, he pushed for troop increases because he knew they were what the President wanted. 68

In his memoirs, <u>Soldier</u>, Matthew Ridgway cautioned against officers' becoming too politicized; <sup>69</sup> said they should always present their "honest views fearlessly, forthrightly [and] objectively;" and warned that the "most dangerous advisor to have around was the yes-man, and the most useless is one who thinks of self instead of service." As MILREP, Taylor chose not to heed the advice of his old mentor. When it came to JFK,

he lost his objectivity and, in the process, became a dangerous yes-man who would not state his honest views fearlessly and forthrightly. In failing to argue his convictions against fighting in Vietnam, Taylor let his President down. His recommendations for significant -- and secretive -- increases in logistical support and personnel (including advisors and 8,000 combat troops to be disguised as "logistical legions" to deal with a Mekong delta flood), made Taylor complicit in "Americanizing" the war,<sup>71</sup> even though he must have foreseen the grave dangers involved. Both his actions and inactions aided and abetted Kennedy's steering the U.S. "far deeper into the quagmire" of the Vietnam War.<sup>72</sup>

The President must have approved of Taylor's loyal flexibility. JFK soon rewarded his MILREP with a promotion to serve as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the position Eisenhower had denied Taylor because of the morally resolute position he had taken against Ike's defense policies. Such resoluteness would not recur in the Kennedy years. The highly moral Taylor-of-old simply never "stood up" during his second coming as a four-star presidential advisor. And the results proved calamitous as Kennedy faced, virtually unarmed of the strong, moral military advice he needed, his second grave decision on Vietnam.

Kennedy's second decision on Vietnam intervention involved the question of whether the U.S. should support the overthrow of the South's inept President, Ngo Diem.

Stanley Karnow, in <u>Vietnam: A History</u>, has provided an in-depth account of this

gruesome event and showed that, contrary to U.S. denials, the Kennedy administration was complicit in the bloody coup d'etat. Making matters worse, the Kennedy men spawned the coup but utterly failed to consider its potential tragic consequences. Thus the Ngo brothers' slaughter became a virtual certainty, and the tiny, faltering nation, already shaky in its efforts to thwart communist insurgency, was left with no one "qualified to take over." In Taylor's own words, this was "one of the great tragedies of the Vietnamese conflict and an important cause of the costly prolongation of the war into the next decade." Because of this coup, America's commitment to preserving South Vietnam became both a moral and practical obligation; from this point forward, the men of Camelot had too much personal interest vested in South Vietnam to ever seriously consider turning back.

Taylor's part in all this is clear. Although he was not directly involved in planning the coup, his actions, once he discovered it, were inauspicious at best and culpable at worst. He had a full understanding of the situation and of its probable consequences. Spurred by his military protégé and commander on the ground, General Paul Harkins, CJCS Taylor initially stood very tall and strongly rejected the coup plans. But, as the other Kennedy advisors pressed forward, his "bureaucratic proclivity" got in the way -- he sat down and muted his objections. As General Kinnard said, "What Taylor did here is not what mattered; the problem was what he failed to do at this time -- to be counted and to force the issue with the president." The old, highly moral and resolute Taylor would have stood firm and bucked his President on this grave issue, but not the new

1960's version of Taylor -- and definitely not this President. As Kinnard said, "Kennedy, whatever his ambivalence toward Diem, again got what he asked for" from his CJCS.

The argument has been made that Taylor may have felt that the coup was a political, not military, issue and, as JCS Chairman, he had no responsibility or right to speak up. <sup>81</sup> If Taylor felt this way, his sitting mute as Kennedy civilians drove the violent overthrow of President Diem would be an action that Professor Kohn might applaud. <sup>82</sup> Yet, this situation serves as a prime example of the fallacy in one's thinking that military advisors should restrict their advice to only military matters. Not all issues fall precisely into an economic, political, social or military category. Important national issues are so complex they likely will transcend several categories.

The Diem coup is a perfect example. Karnow makes clear that Kennedy's Ambassador to South Vietnam, Henry Cabot Lodge, was the driving force behind the coup. He saw it in political terms<sup>83</sup> and he was angered that General Harkins persisted in getting involved, "jockeying behind his back." Yet, Karnow shows that Harkins saw this matter more clearly than virtually anyone, and his was a military view -- he was worried that the coup "could wreck the war effort against the Vietcong."

Clausewitz, who felt that asking soldiers for *purely military advice* made no sense and was damaging and unacceptable, <sup>86</sup> would have no problem with Harkins' getting involved. Neither would former CJCS Admiral William Crowe. In fact, Crowe would

argue that, regardless of Taylor's thinking, he had no latitude in taking a position on a matter so important to the nation. In <u>The Commanders</u>, Crowe stated his belief that the CJCS has "an obligation, at least on the major questions, to honestly and fully give the President his views." And he has "to give more than just military advice;" it must include "political, diplomatic, and economic recommendations" as well. To do otherwise, would be just "a copout. A presidential adviser had to be willing to place his personal prestige on the line and say, here's my overall conclusion. Advice without a bottom line meant little. It was a lot to ask, but that's what [the CJCS] were paid for...." If the advice was rejected, the military advisor "could choose to resign, or stay on and accept the decision. There was no way around giving advice direct and undiluted."

Well, there was one way around giving the advice direct and undiluted, and that was to just sit down and not give any. That is what General Taylor did in this instance. He became the "useless" advisor that General Ridgway so disdained, choosing to just let matters take their sorry course. This is the *real* improper military behavior about which all Americans should be worried.

It is debatable whether Taylor's bucking President Kennedy on this issue would have made any difference. He never placed his personal prestige on the line with Kennedy, so there is no way of knowing. What is known is that the Joint Chiefs of Staff blamed Taylor for not fighting the President more strongly against the coup. And, some historians believe that, at this moment when his word still carried tremendous weight as

the most prestigious American then in uniform, his would have been a powerful voice before a Senate committee against intervention. Yet, Taylor had already "been there, done that"-- and lost. He showed no inclination for an encore performance against JFK. We will never know if a strong General Taylor, resolutely "bucking" Kennedy's intervention moves into Vietnam, would have made any difference because Taylor was too interested in maintaining good relations with his Commander in Chief to try. "Vietnam," as we have come to know and hate it, may well be the result.

### Conclusion

The conclusion to be drawn from Taylor's two tours as a Presidential advisor is that strong military leaders' fighting for that which they believe in no way endangers civil rule in the United States. One must be cautious in generalizing too broadly from anecdotal evidence, but the cases reviewed here demonstrate that, while confrontational civil-military discourse is not desirable, it probably does not pose a threat to American values and freedoms and has worked to their overall advantage. In very important matters, the military position may ultimately be stated vigorously and loudly, but our continuing tradition of civil dominance over the military guarantees that the military messenger will always yield to proper civil authorities for the final decisionmaking. Each time a civil-military flare-up occurs -- as it did between Taylor and Eisenhower -- and the strong military man submits to Presidential authority, the traditions of civil primacy grow stronger and our national well-being is enhanced. The real danger facing civil rule over

the military is in situations where apparently strong military men are incapable, for whatever reason, to do the job for which they are paid -- to deliver advice direct and undiluted. As in the case of Kennedy's early decisions on Vietnam, major national calamity may result when military leaders mute their input on important policy decisions.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Richard H. Kohn, "Out of Control: *The Crisis in Civil-Military Relations*," <u>The National Interest</u> Issue 35 (Spring 1994): 17.

<sup>4</sup> Richard H. Kohn, "Civil-Military Relations Debated," <u>The National Interest</u> Issue 36 (Summer 1994): 29.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Ibid, 15.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Ibid, 17.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Kohn, "Out of Control: The Crisis in Civil-Military Relations," 4.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Ibid, 13.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> David Halberstam, <u>The Best and the Brightest</u> (New York: Random House, 1972), 472.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> David Halberstam, <u>The Fifties</u> (New York: Villard Books, 1993), 396.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> Ibid, 397-398.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> Ibid, 396.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 397.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> Colonel Harry J. Maihafer, <u>Brave Decisions</u> (Washington: Brassey's, 1995), 204.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> General Douglas Kinnard, <u>The Certain Trumpet</u> (Washington: Brassey's, 1991), 41.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> Halberstam, The Best and Brightest, 466.

<sup>19</sup> Maihafer, 206.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> Ibid, 208.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> Ibid, 206.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup> Kinnard, 49-50.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> Ibid.

|                | <sup>25</sup> Kinnard, 50.   |
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|                | <sup>26</sup> Maihafer, 208.   |
|                | <sup>27</sup> Ibid.  |
|                | <sup>28</sup> Maihafer, 207.   |
|                | <sup>29</sup> Kohn, "Civil Military Relations Debated," 31.  |
|                | <sup>30</sup> Kohn, "Out of Control: The Crisis in Civil-Military Relations," 16.  |
| <u>1954 ar</u> | John P. Burke and Fred I. Greenstein, <u>How Presidents Test Reality</u> , <u>Decisions on Vietnam</u> , and 1965 (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1989), 54. |
|                | <sup>32</sup> Ibid.  |
|                | <sup>33</sup> Burke and Greenstein. 54-55.   |
|                | <sup>34</sup> Bob Woodward, <u>The Commanders</u> (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991), 80.  |
|                | <sup>35</sup> Kinnard, 51.   |
|                | <sup>36</sup> Ibid.  |
|                | <sup>37</sup> Ibid, 55.  |
|                | <sup>38</sup> Ibid, 205.   |
|                | <sup>39</sup> Halberstam, <u>The Best and the Brightest</u> , 163-164.   |
|                | <sup>40</sup> Kinnard, 69.   |
|                | <sup>41</sup> Karnow, 251.   |
|                | <sup>42</sup> Kinnard, 52.   |
|                | <sup>43</sup> Halberstam, <u>The Best and the Brightest</u> , 123.   |
|                | <sup>44</sup> Ibid, 163.   |
|                | 45 Kinnard, 212.   |
| esting to      | <sup>46</sup> Ibid, 78.  |
|                | <sup>47</sup> Ibid, 191.   |
|                | <sup>48</sup> Ibid, 195.   |
|                | <sup>49</sup> Ibid, 62.  |

<sup>24</sup> Kohn, "Civil-Military Relations Debated," 30.

On page 4 of "Out of Control: The Crisis in Civil-Military Relations," Professor Kohn writes almost wistfully of the civil-military relations that existed during the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, saying "During the Kennedy and Johnson administrations in the 1960's, Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara restored a degree of civilian control" over the military only to have it weakened by successive Republican administrations. One gets the feeling that Kohn thinks of these as the "good ol' days" of civil-military relations.

Failing to ask hard questions was a major, fundamental problem for the Kennedy (and, later, the Johnson) administration which was populated by some of the most gifted and arrogant minds in the country -- people that David Halberstam called the Best and Brightest and about whom he wrote a 688-page, small-printed best seller by the same name. Halberstam wrote that a "remarkable hubris permeated this entire time" (The Best and Brightest, 123) and described how an exciting sense of American elitism led these men, great in their own minds, to attempt, unquestioningly, impractical, even impossible feats (such as building Western style nations on Southeast Asian culture) (The Best and Brightest, 41). Stanley Karnow described the same phenomenon as a belief in U.S. "omnipotence" and a "myopic sense of 'candoism'" (Vietnam: A History, 254). And, John Burk and Fred Goldstein discuss Irving Janis's concept called "groupthink" -- the tendency on the part of very intelligent members of cohesive groups to engage in uncritical thinking, thus reaching premature and overly optimistic decisions -- and how the concept led the Kennedy men to take and allow unchallenged actions that they should have known would be self-defeating (How the Presidents Test Reality, 6).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>52</sup> Maihafer, 207.

<sup>53</sup> Kinnard, 67

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

According to General Kinnard, Taylor wrote a memorandum to McNamara as Taylor was departing his CJCS job in 1964 to become Ambassador to South Vietnam. In it, he included "a section at the end called civilian-military relationships in the Pentagon." This section included these Taylor words: "During my service as Chairman, I have worked to the best of my ability to attenuate or, if possible, to eliminate the difference -- sometimes real, sometimes imaginary -- between civilian and military authorities in the Department of Defense. I hope that our own personal relationship, of which I have been very proud, has set an example for those around us and has contributed to proper team play (The Certain Trumpet, 133).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>56</sup> Kinnard, 77.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>57</sup> Ibid, 213.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>58</sup> Ibid, 67.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>59</sup> Halberstam, The Best and Brightest, 466.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>60</sup> Matthew Ridgway, <u>Soldier: The Memoirs of Matthew B. Ridgway</u> (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1956), 274-277.

<sup>61</sup> Karnow, 399.

<sup>62</sup> Halberstam, The Best and Brightest, 656.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>63</sup> Ibid, 156. Halberstam seems justified in his assessment that JFK "loaded the dice" by assigning Walt Rostow and General Taylor to lead this fact-finding mission to Vietnam. Kennedy had to

know that these two particular men would likely recommend increased American involvement. Walt Rostow was renowned in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations as a war hawk. He pushed strongly for intervention and converted many to his cause. Author Noam Chomsky, in 1993, called Rostow "the superhawk" and provided a contemporaneous quote by Michael Forrestal, a JFK and LBJ National Security Council member, that referred to "Kennedy doves" who were leaning toward escalation as "adherents of Rostow." (Noam Chomsky, Rethinking Camelot, 94). Taylor was not so hawkish about fighting a land war in Asia, but he surely was influenced in his decision to recommend an increased U.S. troop commitment -- to give JFK what he wanted -- by a Kennedy decision made just 6 months before the Taylor-Rostow trip in October 1961. In that decision, JFK demonstrated clearly his strong leanings toward defending perceived U.S. interests in Southeast Asia. He opted to "up" the military ante in Vietnam, even to the point of breaking international law by surreptitiously sending an additional hundred American military advisers in contravention of the Geneva Accords that disallowed any buildup of manpower in South Vietnam. (Stanley Karnow, Vietnam: A History, 250). As JFK's MILREP, Taylor must have been involved in this decision and, no doubt, got his Taylor-Rostow mission cue from it.

<sup>64</sup> Halberstam compared Taylor's trip report with that of Matthew Ridgway in 1954 which convinced Eisenhower of the futility of intervention in Vietnam: "When Ridgway ... investigated the possibility of U.S. troops in Indochina, he maximized the risks and minimized the benefits; now Taylor was maximizing the benefits and minimizing the risks." (The Best and the Brightest, 172).

<sup>68</sup> It is debatable whether JFK really wanted Taylor and Rostow to recommend troop increases. Professor Lloyd Gardner argues that Kennedy did not want to engage additional troops because, in part, he did not believe that Vietnam was vital to American interests, e.g., Gardner argues that JFK did not believe in the "domino theory" and, thus, Saigon's falling would have little impact on the United States. In this argument, Kennedy was talked into troop escalations against his better judgment by Taylor, Rostow and others in the JFK administration. (Lloyd C. Gardner, Pay and Price, 57-60). No doubt, JFK did not desire a massive troop escalation and this explains his decision to withhold the huge (8,000 man) combat unit that Taylor recommended. Most writers would probably agree that Kennedy did not really want to commit additional troops, but that he had no choice: Supporting a staggering South Vietnamese government in gesture as well as word was necessary. It was also the only political move JFK could smartly make without running the risk of looking "soft" on communism. Stanley Karnow argued that Kennedy did, in fact, believe in the domino theory and fully subscribed to the policy of containment. In JFK's own words. he saw Vietnam as a "proving ground for democracy in Asia" and a "test of American responsibility and determination." Our involvement there was part of his "pay any price" policy. Thus, he must have concluded (probably reluctantly) that we had to "prop up" the Diem regime with American troops. In the end, his actions had clearly spoken louder than any words. At his death, he had approved the assignment of 20,000 soldiers to South Vietnam, most of them in violation of the Geneva agreement. (Stanley Karnow, Vietnam: A History, 247-253). As far as Taylor's part in the argument goes, he later described his recommendation to JFK to commit 8,000 combat troops as a "deliberate straddle," meaning, according to Karnow, that he merely wanted to give the President an option. In giving Kennedy this option, Taylor contravened many of his previous positions on Vietnam and other areas that had formerly been important to him. His report downplayed the problems inherent in fighting in the Vietnamese jungles, saying that South Vietnam "is not an excessively difficult or unpleasant place to operate." He also said that "North Vietnam is extremely vulnerable to conventional bombing.... There is no case for fearing a mass onslaught of Communist manpower into South Vietnam...if our air power is allowed a free hand against logistical targets." (Karnow, 252). Taylor knew these statements were not totally truthful. The first ran exactly opposite of what General Ridgway's in-depth study and report to Eisenhower had shown. And

<sup>65</sup> Kinnard, 218.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, 218.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid. 104.

Taylor had spent four long, weary years as Army Chief of Staff arguing against the Air Force's claims of air power greatness on the battlefield. Now, for some reason, he found it necessary to repudiate all that. Also, see Note #63. One can only surmise that Taylor was attempting, as General Kinnard said, to give JFK what he wanted -- and he clearly bent his principles to do so.

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69 Ridgway, 331.
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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>70</sup> Ibid, 351.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>71</sup> Karnow, 252-253.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>72</sup> Halberstam, <u>The Best and the Brightest</u>, 177.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>73</sup> Karnow, 277-311.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>74</sup> Ibid, 310-311.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>75</sup> Ibid, 299.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>76</sup> Kinnard, 128.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>78</sup> Karnow, 298-299.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>79</sup> Kinnard, 218.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

Kohn condemned Colin Powell for exceeding the bounds of his JCS Chairmanship by intruding in non-military governmental decisionmaking. He found it very troubling that Powell assumed the role as the arbiter of American military intervention overseas and called it an "unprecedented policy role for a senior military officer, and the most explicit intrusion into policy since MacArthur's conflict with Truman." And, Kohn was very uncomfortable with other aspects of Powell's "military intrusion into foreign policy," especially Powell's publishing policy statements that seem geared toward effecting U.S. policy in world affairs. ("Out of Control: *The Crisis in Civil-Military Relations*," Richard Kohn, 12).

<sup>83</sup> Karnow, 297-298.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid, 298.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>86</sup> Carl Von Clausewitz, <u>On War</u>, eds. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1976), 607.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>87</sup> Woodward, 39.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Kinnard, 128.

<sup>90</sup> Halberstam, The Best and the Brightest, 467.

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